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"The girl is kind of image-like": female passivity in the fiction of Fanny Fern

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"The girl is kind of image-like": Female passivity in the fiction of Fanny Fern

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

RUTH HALL 5

FANNY FORD 11

ROSE CLARK 24

CONCLUSION 36

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY 38

WORKS CITED 45

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 47

INTRODUCTION

Fanny Fern (Sarah Payson Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton) (1811-1872) is best known today for her long career as a newspaper columnist, but she was also the author of three works of fiction. Of the three, only the first, *Ruth Hall* (1854), has been adequately studied by critics and scholars. The other two, "Fanny Ford" (1855) and *Rose Clark* (1856), have been largely ignored and given only cursory attention when mentioned. I think there are two reasons for this. The first is a problem of access. These works have not been reprinted since their original editions and are available only on microfilm today. The second, the reason that forms the basis of this study, has to do with the critics' perception of these works. The argument has often been made that the main female characters in these two works are simply not worthy of study, that they are so passive that they defy description. I agree with the assessment that the main female characters are extremely passive, but I feel that this is exactly why these works should be studied. I believe that Fanny Fern made a conscious choice to create her characters the way she did and that it is worthwhile to consider exactly what she did and why she did it. In this study I intend to do just that.

In each of her fictional works, Fanny Fern has created a different type of passive female protagonist. In *Ruth Hall*, the title character starts out in life as a very submissive person. She begins her adult life as a model housewife, never

opposing anything that is done to her. Even after she is suddenly widowed, she tries as best she can to live on the meager support she receives from her family, never wanting to bother anyone by asking for more. Finally, she can no longer live this way, and she has to go out into the world and fend for herself as a writer. Through hard work and determination, she becomes very successful and ends up making $10,000 on the sale of her first book. Ruth Hall has had to become an active person in order to survive in the world, and she has been rewarded handsomely for that.

Ruth Hall was a best seller and seems to have been a big hit with the public, but the critics hated it. Among the many objections to it was the charge that Fern had been "unwomanly" in creating such a strong, successful female character.

In "Fanny Ford," which she began writing almost immediately after *Ruth Hall* was published, Fern took matters to the other extreme. The first female protagonist of the story is Mary Ford, a young woman who becomes catatonic after the shock of learning that her fiancé has been sent to prison. Despite her extreme passivity, she marries a man who wants her only as a possession, and she even gives birth to a daughter, Fanny. But she is so withdrawn from life that she eventually fades away and dies. The storyline then shifts over to her daughter, Fanny Shaw. After the death of her father, young Fanny goes to live with her grandmother until the old woman also dies. Fanny is then adopted by a traveling salesman who is, unknown to her, the same man who was once her mother's fiancé and has since

been released from prison. After spending her adolescent years in boarding school, Fanny eventually marries this man, thereby accomplishing her mother's one wish in life.

At first glance, the plot of this novella is so bizarre that it has been hard for critics to deal with, but it begins to make sense when cast in the light of the controversy surrounding *Ruth Hall.* After having been told that her main character in that novel was too active, Fern made this one so passive that she eventually died. Unfortunately, the death of the main character generally means the death of a story, so Fern had to shift the focus to Mary's daughter, Fanny Shaw, a slightly more active character, in order to finish the story.

In her third and final fictional work, Fern tries yet another variation on the active/passive theme. *Rose Clark* is the story of a young orphan who is similar in some respects to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre.* After suffering through a miserable childhood under the care of her cruel, vain aunt, Rose becomes a mother at age 16. She insists rather ineffectually that she is married, but no one believes her. Although she seems almost unable to help herself, events are always conspiring to help Rose. After a series of breathtaking coincidences that take almost 5 years to play out, she finally is reunited with her husband, who, it turns out, has been suffering from amnesia.

The problem with this novel, according to the critics, is that the coincidences that drive the plot are totally unrealistic. Once again, the plot begins to make sense

only in light of the *Ruth Hall* criticism. Fern has again found it necessary to make her heroine so passive (this time as a result of her extreme youth) that she is almost unable to act. Rose can maneuver through the events of the story and come out victorious on the other side only through the intervention of the author.

The one thing these characters have in common is that they are variations of the "true woman." This type of character, as described by Barbara Welter in her article "The Cult of True Womanhood," has four main attributes: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[1] Nina Baym has stated that the protagonists in woman's fiction are never "true women" (xxxviii-xxxix), but I feel otherwise. Ruth Hall, Mary Ford, Fanny Shaw, and Rose Clark all exhibit the character traits of "true womanhood" to varying degrees, and to demonstrate this will be one of my main goals in this work.[2]

My further goal will be to demonstrate that Fanny Fern used the character type of the "true woman" purposely and subversively. She could not state her idea that women should be active and take control of their own destiny as boldly as she first thought, so she took a different tack. By creating characters so passive that they were laughable, she pointed out how unrealistic the "true woman" actually was.

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[1] This article, though now over 30 years old, has been very influential in the study of women's fiction of this time period. Among other things, it has formed the foundation for an entire book by Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood.*

[2] The idea of linking Fern's characters with Welter's "true woman" model does not originate with me. Joyce W. Warren, Martha J. Cutter, and Jeffrey Steele have all used the term "true woman" to describe the character of Ruth Hall. I have expanded the idea to include Fern's other female characters and also tried to examine in detail how each of these characters fits the paradigm of the "true woman."

RUTH HALL

So much has been written about Fanny Fern's first novel, *Ruth Hall,* in the last 20 years or so that I feel it is unnecessary to spend much time dealing with the novel itself. Anyone who is interested in learning more about *Ruth Hall* may do so by studying the many excellent works I have listed in the bibliography appended to this work. (The most definitive of these is the most recent, the 1999 study by Martha Cutter in her book *Unruly Tongue.*)

What I will be dealing with in this section is the critical opinion surrounding *Ruth Hall,* both at the time it was written and today. What will become evident is that the very features that made Fanny Fern's first novel so dangerous in the eyes of the reviewers of her day are the same features that have made it so popular with the critics of today.

When *Ruth Hall* was published in 1854, it was wildly successful with the public. It sold 55,000 copies, making it the fifth most popular book ever published in America up to that time (Geary 370). Merchants tried to capitalize on the success of the novel, selling everything from sheet music to bonnets by using the name Ruth Hall (Warren 124).

The book did not, however, meet with the same success with the critics. It was condemned for being too masculine and too satirical. Typical is this review from the *New York Times* on December 20, 1854: "If Fanny Fern were a man,

...*Ruth Hall* would be a natural and excusable book. But we confess that we cannot understand how a delicate, suffering woman can hunt down even her persecutors so remorselessly" (qtd. in Warren 124-25). The critics couldn't accept that a woman would dare to write as Fanny Fern did in *Ruth Hall,* so they rejected the book.

Only one person came forward in public to say that she thought *Ruth Hall* was a great book and that the other reviewers just didn't understand: Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Writing in the suffragist paper *Una,* she said, "The great lesson taught in *Ruth Hall* is that God has given to woman sufficient brain and muscle to work out her own destiny unaided and alone" (qtd. in Warren 140).

Stanton was the only critic to publicly support Fanny Fern, but she was not the only person to express such feelings. Although he never made his views public, Nathaniel Hawthorne privately wrote to his editor that he admired Fanny Fern:

> The woman writes as if the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only able to be distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency and come before the public stark naked, as it were—then their books are sure to possess character and value. (qtd. in Warren 1)

Almost one hundred and fifty years later, Nathaniel Hawthorne's views are shared by most of the critics writing on *Ruth Hall* today. It seems to be universally

agreed that *Ruth Hall* is an important novel primarily because of the strength, resourcefulness, and independence shown by its title character. David S. Reynolds writes, "*Ruth Hall* is an innovative record of woman's suffering and woman's triumph" (404). Nina Baym declares, "*Ruth Hall* shows how very happy her fame and money made the heroine, and how pleased she is... to be free of the swindle of love" (253). Susan K. Harris says, "*Ruth Hall* has inscribed a new woman, one who will write her own story rather than allowing it to be written for her" (625). These are only a few examples taken from many recent studies of *Ruth Hall*, but they demonstrate the current critical opinion of the novel.

In light of all the respect and admiration that has been shown towards *Ruth Hall* in recent years, it is easy to discount the real animosity shown towards the book when it was first published. It is easy to believe that Fanny Fern must have known something of the intrinsic value of her novel, and that some part of her was aware that it would one day be admired and appreciated. Realistically, this is probably not true. The only opinions Fern had to deal with at the time were those of the contemporary critics, such as the critic for *Harper's Magazine*, who avowed, "The whole book is embittered. It is not easy to see why, nor to what good result" (551), or the editor of *The Southern Quarterly Review*, who wrote that *Ruth Hall* was nothing but an example of "inspired mediocrity" and "presumptuous littleness" (450). With nothing but bad reviews facing her, it is not surprising that Fanny Fern decided to change her tactics when writing her next work of fiction.

Although Fern wrote nothing at the time about her reaction to her reviews, her later writings provide strong evidence that they did, in fact, bother her. In 1864, ten years later, she wrote a column in the *New York Ledger* in which she reminisced about her sorrow at the time. "How I did cry if an editor reviewed me personally, instead of my book, in his book notices. How I used to wish I were... some high and mighty pugilist, to make mincemeat of the coward" (qtd. in Warren 128).

In Fern's final novel, *Rose Clark*, the artist Gertrude Dean, who has often been taken to be Fern's persona in the novel (Warren 201), expresses even more strongly her hatred of critics. I cannot include Gertrude's entire diatribe here, since it takes up almost all of Chapter 44, but in the most quotable passage she compares the average critic to a hack surgeon. The writer is "thumped on the head with his butchering cleaver, every nerve quivering under the crucifixion of his coarse scalpel" (287). Clearly, Fern did not have a positive view of reviewers.

Of course, there are many other possible reasons why Fanny Fern might have changed her writing style in her next fictional work, "Fanny Ford." These reasons include the difference between writing a continuous work and writing serially, and a change of genre ("Fanny Ford" can be considered to be a melodrama). Her negative reviews are simply one cause that I have chosen to explore in detail.

The critics' main criticism of Ruth Hall had been that she was too strong, but the fact is that she wasn't a particularly strong character at all. In Ruth Hall, Fanny Fern had created a character that should have been almost impossible to criticize.

Ruth is very submissive to all those around her. She agrees to live with her mother-in-law after her marriage, even though the older Mrs. Hall cannot stand Ruth. She does this to please her husband, and the reader learns that "he little dreamed of the self-conquest she had so tearfully achieved for his sake" (15). Later on, after her husband dies, she agrees to become a washerwoman in her own cousin's house rather than bother her father and in-laws for more money (101). Even in her writing, Ruth always takes the first offer of payment that a publisher makes, instead of holding out for a better deal.

Ruth is not naturally talented at anything, but through practice she becomes successful at everything she tries. This is first revealed through her domestic endeavors. When she marries, she doesn't even know how to bake bread, much to the consternation of her mother-in-law (13), yet a few years later, she has learned to make pies and steaks with ease, despite the fact that she employs a cook (30). Likewise, when she first begins to write, her own brother refuses to publish her articles, saying that she has no talent (146-47), but by the end of the novel, he has named his boat after her pen name (226), and she has made $10,000 in royalties from the sale of her first book (269).

Ruth has become successful at writing, but not because she wanted fame. She has only turned to the pen to support her two daughters after her husband's death. This is very important. As Jeffrey Steele writes,

> Ruth Hall's strength... is grounded in a pain first apprehended through the Christianized language of nineteenth-century sentimentality, with its vivid iconography of female grief. As Ruth expands the scope of her action and gains strength, she continues to maintain her position as a "true woman" who is a capable mother and a pious individual. (108)

Ruth never lets fame go to her head or become a goal in its own right. Her only consideration is the welfare of her daughters. Thus, even her fame has come about because of her status as a "true woman": pious, pure, domestic, and submissive.

Yet the character of Ruth Hall did not please the critics. Fern was advised by the reviewer in the *London Atlas* that she should follow a "more womanly and modest course in her future works" (qtd. in Warren 125). He and the other reviewers seemed to want her to create a main character that was so passive that she was incapable of any action at all. This is exactly what she gave them in her next story, "Fanny Ford."

FANNY FORD

"Fanny Ford" was published serially in the *New York Ledger* beginning on June 9, 1855. Robert Bonner, publisher of the *Ledger*, had initially offered Fern $25 a column to write the story. He was trying to boost circulation of his paper by publishing big-name authors, as Fern had become following the success of *Ruth Hall.* (Some of the other famous authors he signed contracts with around this time were Lydia Sigourney, E.D.E.N. Southworth, and Charles Dickens.) Fern refused his offer, saying she was too busy, but eventually accepted when offered $100 a column, the highest price ever paid by a newspaper to a writer at that time. "Fanny Ford" eventually filled ten columns, making Fern's final payment for the story $1000 (Warren 145-47). The story was reprinted in *Fresh Leaves*, one of Fern's volumes of collected newspaper writings, in 1857. It has not been reprinted since.

Fanny Fern had first claimed that she was too busy to write "Fanny Ford," and even though she eventually did when lured with an incredible sum of money, the story may have been low on her list of priorities. Her 400-page novel, *Rose Clark*, was published only 6 months after "Fanny Ford," and so it seems likely that she may have been writing both stories simultaneously. This lack of attention on her part may account in at least some part for the excesses of the plot of "Fanny Ford."

The story begins with Mary Ford, the beautiful daughter of a self-made man, Jacob Ford, who rose from obscurity as a tailor to become a well-to-do merchant.

Mary is happily engaged to Percy Lee, a nineteen-year-old "businessman." Upon hearing the news that he has been arrested for embezzlement, Mary falls ill for two months. Seemingly fully recovered, she visits Percy in jail, only to go into a sharp decline immediately afterwards. She becomes catatonic and spends the rest of her life silently sitting in her rocking chair, hearing and seeing nothing of the world around her.

Jacob, Mary's father, is so distraught that he neglects his business and it is eventually foreclosed. The family moves to a small farm in the country, but Jacob dies a short time later, the day after he finds religion. Convinced that she will die soon as well, Lucy, Mary's mother, agrees to give Mary's hand in marriage to Tom Shaw, a former beau who says that he still loves her despite her inactive state, but actually wants her only as a possession. The marriage is somehow consummated and Mary dies in childbirth nine months later.

With Mary's death, the focus of the story switches to her tiny daughter, Fanny. She is raised by her grandmother in the attic of her father's mansion,[3] never seeing him until after his death in a drunken fall down the stairs. Fanny and Lucy then move to a small cottage in the country, where Lucy is forced to take in piecework in order to make ends meet. They live in complete solitude except for the visits of a kindly peddler, who is, unknown to anyone but the reader, none other

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[3] This is only the first of several attic references in Fern's fiction. Being hidden in an attic is one of the recurring images of her work. For more on this image in other women's fiction of this time period, see Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

than Percy Lee, who has been pardoned after saving the life of a guard during a prison altercation. When Lucy dies, Percy becomes Fanny's guardian and places her in boarding school. He returns ten years later to find her a beautiful girl of seventeen, exactly the same age as her mother was when he last knew her. Percy and Fanny get married and live happily ever after, never becoming aware that Percy was almost assassinated at their wedding by one of his prison enemies.

As can be seen from the above description, the plot of this novella is unusual. Much of this may have to do with the fact that it was published serially. Each segment needed to end with some kind of dramatic cliffhanger, which may account for some of the unevenness of the plot, which focuses more on dramatic events and surprises than either of Fern's novels. I think this unevenness is one of the reasons why the critics have almost ignored it. The only significant analysis has been done by Joyce W. Warren in her biography of Fanny Fern. In her study, she concentrates on the character of Lucy Ford, who she feels is superior to either Mary or Fanny (197). I agree that Lucy is an admirable character and may be the only three-dimensional character in the whole story, yet I feel that it cannot be overlooked that Fern did not call this story "Lucy Ford." She called it "Fanny Ford," and so that must be the first place any analysis of the story begins. There is a problem here, however. The first instinct of the reader is to look for a character named Fanny Ford, but there is no such character in the novel.

I feel that to understand this story at all, it is necessary to view Fanny Shaw and Mary Ford as combining to form a character, Fanny Ford, as the title of the novella hints. Mary is too passive to survive in the story, and she dies before the plot has been completed by her eventual reunion with Percy. Fanny becomes the second incarnation of Mary, who can realize her mother's dreams and finally marry Percy. In the rest of this section, I will elaborate this view by giving textual examples to demonstrate the characters of both Mary and Fanny: how they are similar, how they are different, and how they can be seen as blending together.

First it is necessary to understand the character of Mary Ford. There are two distinct stages in her characterization, first the happy girl that she is when the story opens, and next the silent, brooding woman she becomes after her disappointment. I will give textual examples to show each stage.

Mary's appearance is described extensively in the first paragraph of the novel:

> A queenly girl was the tailor's daughter, with her Juno-like figure, her small, well-shaped head, poised so daintily on the fair white throat; with her large, blue eyes, by turns brilliant as the lightning's flash, then soft as a moonbeam; with her pretty mouth, and the dimple which lay *perdu* in the corner, with the flossy waves of her dark brown hair; with her soft, white hands, and twinkling little feet; with her winsome smile, and floating grace of motion. (114-15)

This description tells the reader that Mary is lovely, yet it provides few useful details about her appearance. It seems to be enough to know that she is small and dainty, without dwelling on the particulars of her appearance.

This early Mary is described in natural imagery, most often as being like a flower. "Mary is no coquette; no more than the sweet flower, which nods, and sways, and sends forth its perfume for the very joy that it blossoms in the bright sunshine, all unconscious how it tempts the passer-by to pluck it for its own wearing." (114) A few pages later, Percy thinks of Mary as being like a flower: "In Mary both his heart and taste were satisfied; true, he sometimes wondered how so delicate and dainty a flower should have blossomed from out so rude a soil." (116) What these two descriptions have in common, besides the floral imagery, is the idea that Mary exists for no other reason than to please those around her. She seems to have no personality at all other than the fact that she is pleasant, submissive, and pure.

This idea is borne out by the description of Mary's relationship with her father:

> Unspoiled by the world's flatteries, she had not learned to undervalue her doting father's love, that it was expressed in ungrammatical phrase; she had not yet learned to blush at any old-fashioned breach of etiquette (on his part), in the presence of her fastidious young friends; and by her marked deference to her parents in their presence, she in a

> measure exacted the same from them. It was one of the loveliest traits in Mary's character, and one for which Percy, who appreciated her refinement, loved and respected her the more. (119)

Mary is valued by those around her because she is loving and obedient to them, not because of anything she herself has done.

Mary is also religious, but only in a superficial sort of way.

> "Life is very sweet," said Mary, turning her lustrous eyes upon her lover. "People say that happiness and prosperity harden the heart; when I am most blest I feel most devotional. In vain might the infidel tell me there is no God, with such a scene as this before me, or fetter my grateful heart-pulses as they adored the Giver." (120)

With no sort of personality to fall back on other than her relationships to those around her, and a religious faith that is strong only when she is happy, it is no wonder that Mary cannot weather the blow when Percy is sent to prison. When she is first seen after she has visited him there, she is "rocking herself to and fro, with her hands crossed listlessly in her lap, her blue-veined temples growing each day most startlingly transparent." (138) The longer description of her after they have moved to the farm is even more telling:

> Mary would sit at the window, twisting her curls over her fingers, or leaning out, as if watching for Percy. Sometimes she would sit on the low door-step, when the stars came out, with her head in Jacob's lap,

> while his wrinkled fingers strayed soothingly over her temples. She seldom or never spoke; did mechanically what she was bid, except that she drew shuddering back, when they would have her cross the threshold. (141-42)

Mary's life seems to have stopped. She has never had a personality except that defined by others, and when her most significant other, Percy, is removed from her life, her life loses all meaning. Yet even now, when her mind is almost gone, she is still submissive to her parents in almost every way.

Even when Mary cannot contribute at all to the lives of those around her, she is still considered to be beautiful and precious and is still described in floral imagery. The Fords' new neighbors, who have never known Mary any other way, are taken with her: "The poor sick girl, she looked like a water-lily—so white, so bowed down; why didn't they put her into a shay, and drive her out, to bring a little color into her waxen cheeks?" (142) In fact the neighbors do more than just worry about Mary; they constantly bring her gifts in the hope that she will favor them with a smile—a bouquet of flowers, strawberries, cake, and even a horse are a few examples that are listed in the text. (143)

By this point, the descriptions of Mary are beginning to shift from those of natural beauty (flowers) to those of artificial beauty (works of art). "The girl is kind of image-like," one of the neighbors says of Mary, evoking an image of a beautiful painting that can be appreciated but never understood. (151) By the eve of her

wedding, the transformation has become complete: "One might have taken her for some beautiful statue, with those faultless marble features, and that motionless attitude." (152)

After the wedding, Mary disappears completely from the text. The reader learns first about the details of life in the farm community and then about Tom Shaw and his growing boredom with Mary, but Mary herself is never seen again. The next the reader hears of her, she has died. Lucy feels that little has changed even though her daughter has finally passed away: "It was nothing new to see Mary lie with marble face, folded hands, and softly-fringed, closed eyes." (160) She has already been dead to her life, and to the text, for quite some time.

Looking back at the progression of these descriptions of Mary, it is obvious that as Mary has become more passive, the descriptions of her beauty have changed. Her bright, living beauty in the beginning has become the still, dead beauty of a marble statue. Her ultimate beauty has come hand in hand with death, the ultimate passivity.[4]

At this point, the story is only half over. The death of the female protagonist has left the plot hanging in mid-air. Fortunately, Mary's death has brought with it a new life, her tiny daughter, Fanny Shaw, who assumes the role of female protagonist when only a few hours old. She is described as being a "gasping,

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[4] In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar describe the linkage of death and beauty in more detail, particularly the tendency of women to "' kill' themselves into art objects" through dieting and other means, sacrificing their health for the beauty of weakness (24). The character of Mary Shaw can

helpless thing." (160) Even at an early age, Fanny is already more active than her mother had been, for she can gasp.

When Fanny next appears, she is a little girl of about 4 or 5. In her physical appearance, she is much like her mother: "Dear little Fanny! With her plump little arms thrown carelessly over her curly head, her pearly teeth just gleaming through her parted lips..." (166) Yet the reader soon learns that Fanny is very different from her mother in personality.

Fanny is confined to the attic of the house with her grandmother, just as her mother was confined to the house for so many years, but Fanny's confinement, unlike her mother's, is involuntary. The reader learns that Fanny wants to go outside and be in the world:

> Sometimes Fanny amused herself by climbing up to the little window, overlooking the square where a silvery fountain tossed its sparkling little diamonds to the sun, who turned them all sorts of pretty colors, and sent them quivering back again. Little Fanny liked that! Then she saw little children playing round the fountain, sailing their tiny boats on its bosom, and clapping their hands gleefully when they rode safely into port. Great shaggy Newfoundland dogs, too, jumped into the water, and swam, with their black noses just above the surface, and ever and anon sprang out upon the mossy bank, shaking their shaggy

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be seen as an extreme manifestation of this trend, as she literally dies into her beauty.

> coats upon the more dainty ones of mamma's little pets, quite regardless of lace, silk, or ribbon. It was a pretty sight, and little Fanny wanted to go to the fountain too. (166-7)

Fanny longs for activity and adventure. She is already showing herself to be a very different person than her mother ever was.

Fanny is considerate, too, watching out for her grandmother and trying to help her as much as she can:

> Fanny handed her her spectacles, and a cricket to put her poor tired feet upon, and picked up the spools of cotton when they rolled upon the floor, and learned too to thread her needles quite nicely, for grandmamma's eyes were getting dim; and sometimes Fanny would try to make the bed, but her hand was so tiny that she could not even cover one of the small roses of its patch-work quilt. (167)

Fanny is willing and happy to work, something that her mother never seemed willing or able to do. She tells her grandmother, "I wish I could do something useful. I can only brush up the hearth, and fill the tea-kettle, and pick up your spools, and thread your needle." (172)

Unlike her mother, Fanny has a strong religious faith. She sees God expressed in nature, and thinks about

> how God taught the little birds to build their cradle nests, and find their way through the air; and how He provided even for the little

> ants, who so patiently, grain by grain, built their houses in the gravel walk; and how He kept the grass green with the dew and showers, and ripened the fruit, and opened the blossoms with the warm sunshine, and how He was always watching over us, caring for our wants, listening to our cries, pitying us for our sorrows, and making His sun to shine even on those who forget to thank Him for it. (191)

For Fanny, religion is not just something she thinks about when she is happy; it is something that can make her happy just by thinking about it.

There is one way that Fanny is exactly like her mother, though, and that is in her love for Percy Lee. The first time he comes to their cottage, Fanny asks her grandmother a rather unusual question for such a little girl. "'May I love him, grandma?' whispered Fanny, for there was something in the peddler's voice that brought tears into her eyes." (174) Lucy doesn't hear the question, for she has begun to go deaf, but Fanny decides to love him anyway.

After her grandmother dies, Fanny becomes the ward of Percy Lee and travels with him to her new home at boarding school. On the journey, the comparison of Fanny to her mother becomes even stronger. As they travel, Percy finds himself "sometimes answering her questions at random, as the tones of her voice, or the expressions of her face, recalled her lost mother; sometimes looking proudly upon the bud, as he thought how sweet and fair would be the blossom" (195). The comparison here is quite explicit; not only is Fanny directly compared to

her mother, but she is also described in floral imagery, as Mary was at beginning of the story. This is the first clue the reader has that Fanny is taking over the story where Mary left off.

Percy leaves Fanny at the boarding school and returns to get her ten years later. What he finds when he arrives is that she has become a new version of Mary. She is described as having a "queenly presence," as Mary was in the opening scene. "In truth," the reader is told, "she was Mary's own self." Her physical description is very much like her mother's: "Fanny was very lovely, with those rippling waves of silken hair, and the light and shadow, flitting like summer clouds over her speaking face" (201).

Yet this is not the whole picture. In the next breath, the description of her is revised: "Ah—she is the same little Fanny after all—frank, guileless, and free-hearted. She flies into his arms, puts up her rosy lips for a kiss, and says '*Dear* Cousin John'" (201). Fanny has become an active version of Mary, one who is able to express her feelings and do things instead of just waiting for things to happen to her, one who is able to enter into an equal partnership with Percy instead of being worshipped by him from afar. She has won him in a way that her mother never could.

If the reader is working with the assumption that Fanny represents both herself and Mary at the same time, then it makes sense that Percy is "to be all to

Fanny—father, brother, husband" (207).[5] The vague suggestion of incest that the reader might feel upon first reading the story is explained (although not totally obliterated) with the perception that Fanny and Mary are sharing the same role within the story. Fanny has finished what Mary has started, and together they do become one character—Fanny Ford.

It also seems that neither Mary nor Fanny is the perfect "true woman" figure. Mary is pure and submissive, while Fanny is pious and domestic. Together, they make up a "true woman," but neither is one taken by herself.

In "Fanny Ford," then, Fanny Fern has demonstrated that no one person can be the perfect true woman. Mary Ford tries and loses her life through passivity. Fern has demonstrated through this character that the life lived by such a beautiful, passive creature is ultimately meaningless. A reader cannot accept a story that ends with the death of Mary, so the story has to continue through Fanny.

Since "Fanny Ford" was never published by itself, there were few reviews of it, and so it is hard to tell what Fern's contemporaries thought of the novella. It was translated into German in 1856 (Warren 195), so it must have been the subject of some interest. However it was received, Fern didn't rest on her laurels for long before publication of her longest and most ambitious novel, *Rose Clark.*

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[5] In an example of life imitating art, Fanny Fern's widower, James Parton, was to marry her daughter, Ellen Eldredge, in 1876, four years after Fern's death. They had two children together, Mabel and Hugo (Adams 26).

ROSE CLARK

Rose Clark, Fanny Fern's last and most ambitious novel, was published in December of 1855 by Mason Brothers. It has not been reprinted since.

At 417 pages, *Rose Clark* is twice as long as *Ruth Hall* and four times as long as "Fanny Ford." Consequently, its plot is much more complicated and wide-ranging than that of either of the previously mentioned works. In order to help keep track of the events, I think it is worthwhile to adopt Joyce W. Warren's scheme of dividing the novel into five segments, which she compares to a five-act play (204-5).

In the first section, Rose Clark, an orphan who is approximately five years old, is brought to the orphanage run by Mrs. Markham. This is a very dreary environment for all the children who live there, and Mrs. Markham proves to be a disinterested and often hypocritical caretaker. The children are fed poorly and not allowed to play. The reader learns that Rose is not totally alone in the world; she has an Aunt Dolly who brought her to the orphanage and plans to remove her once she is old enough to work for her in her milliner's shop.

Finally, the day arrives when Aunt Dolly comes for Rose, but she quickly proves to be no better than Mrs. Markham. Dolly resents Rose because she resembles her mother, Dolly's sister Maria, who was clearly the more brilliant and beautiful of the two sisters. Rose is forced to work long hours sewing and attending

to household chores, and she is not allowed to go to school or have any friends, since Dolly feels these things would only make her unhappy with her lot in life.

There is a passage of time between the end of the first section and the beginning of the second. When the reader next sees Rose, she is sixteen years old and riding in a stagecoach with her infant son. The reader gradually learns that she has believed herself married to a man named Vincent L'Estrange Vincent, who deserted her. She has been sent away in shame by her Aunt Dolly, who has finally achieved her goal of marrying a rich man and become Mrs. John Howe. Dolly has become very haughty now that she has money and has even taken a lover.

Rose goes to live with the gentle Mrs. Bond, who is the first positive character that Rose has met. Unfortunately, Rose discovers that she has left an important letter at her aunt's home and decides to return there. Her son Charley is taken ill and she is forced to stay in the attic of her aunt's home until he recovers. While up there, she discovers that her senile grandmother is also hidden in the attic, further proof that Aunt Dolly thinks of nothing but herself and how she appears to the world.

Rose finally is able to return to Mrs. Bond's home, where she feels safe from the world's taunts. This illusion of protection is shattered when Mrs. Bond's own servant insults her. Rose runs away that night, taking Charley with her.

Meanwhile, it is revealed that Aunt Dolly has finally given birth to her own baby, whom she spoils dreadfully after having been so unsympathetic when Charley

was ill. Unfortunately, the baby girl dies at her own christening ceremony, and Dolly is left inconsolable.

The third section opens with Rose on a ship bound for New Orleans. She is certain somehow that she will be able to find Vincent there. On the ship, Charley is again taken ill, and he is nursed back to health by Dr. John Perry, who quickly falls in love with Rose. He proposes to her, but she demurs, saying that she is already married to Charley's father. Dr. Perry decides to keep track of Rose and watch over her, even if she will not agree to marry him.

In New Orleans, Rose searches tirelessly for Vincent, until one day she reads his obituary in the newspaper. She is taken ill upon hearing the news and is nursed back to health by Dr. Perry. During this time, her son Charley is taken care of by a servant named Chloe, who once worked for Vincent's mother. Chloe brings Charley to see Mrs. Vincent, who decides that she would like to adopt him.

During her convalescence, Rose makes friends with her neighbor, Gertrude Dean, a divorced woman who has become quite successful as an artist. She gives Rose the confidence to believe that she could make it on her own if she needed to. When Gertrude and Dr. Perry, Rose's only two friends, finally meet, it is revealed that they are long-lost brother and sister.

Meanwhile, Dolly convinces her husband to take her on a trip so she can escape the painful memories of her baby's death. The train they are on is derailed, and in the accident Dolly loses her false teeth.

Back in New Orleans, Rose visits Mrs. Vincent to discuss the adoption. Rose is reluctant to give up all rights to her son, but feels it might be a good idea because she does not want him to grow up with the scandal of having an unwed mother, as Rose has finally admitted that she must be. Mrs. Vincent's servant, Anne Cooper, who hopes to inherit all of the Vincent fortune one day, convinces her mistress that Rose is lying and Charley could not really be Vincent's son. Mrs. Vincent is so incensed that she not only calls off the adoption, but also arranges for Rose to be evicted from her apartment.

The fourth section opens at Niagara Falls. Rose, Gertrude, Dr. Perry, and Charley have all traveled there together to escape the stigma that Rose faced in New Orleans. While there, Rose has a dream that Vincent is still alive and is searching for her. The vacation ends when Dr. Perry overhears a plot by Gertrude's ex-husband to extort some money from her.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Bond is visited by a haggard traveler, who turns out to be Rose's long-lost husband. Mrs. Bond tells him what little she knows, but since she doesn't know Rose's whereabouts, she cannot be much help to Vincent, who continues his search alone.

At this point, it is revealed though letters what happened to Dolly Howe. After her loss of her false teeth, she for a time became very subdued and more respectful to her husband. Unfortunately, it was too little, too late; he had already

turned to gambling. Deserted by her lover when her money ran out, Dolly became an alcoholic and died in a police station.

The reader learns that Mrs. Markham also has suffered a reversal. She has been discovered, after all this time, to be negligent in her duties as overseer of the orphanage, and she is fired.

After another passage of time, the last section opens in Boston, where Rose, Charley, Gertrude, and Dr. Perry have all set up housekeeping together. Charley is now six years old and being teased at school because he has no father. It is revealed that Mrs. Bond has died peacefully. Vincent finally arrives in Boston, where he happens to encounter Dr. Perry, who has finally felt sure that Rose will agree to marry him. Although he doesn't want to do so initially, Dr. Perry brings Vincent to see Rose, who greets her long-lost husband with a passionate kiss.

Vincent tells his story. After leaving Rose to go to visit his family and tell them of his marriage, he was attacked by brigands hired to kill him by his evil cousin from New Orleans, also named Vincent L'Estrange Vincent. They didn't succeed in their attempt, but he did suffer from amnesia for almost a year afterwards. Since that time he had been searching the country for Rose.

It is decided that Vincent, Rose, and Charley will continue to live with Gertrude Dean and John Perry, at least for the time being. John and Vincent vow to treat each other like brothers, and Vincent thanks John for taking such good care of Rose.

One night Charley hears a low moan outside of the window. It is an old, dying beggar woman. She is carried inside the house, and Rose recognizes her as Mrs. Markham, her childhood tormentor. Rose forgives her, and Mrs. Markham dies peacefully, thus bringing the action of the novel full circle.

This plot is even more wide-ranging than that of "Fanny Ford" and may seem overwhelming in summation, but *Rose Clark* taken as a whole seems surprisingly realistic. Events are described so thoroughly and convincingly that even the wildest plot twists seem believable. In terms of style alone, I feel that *Rose Clark* is by far the most successful of Fanny Fern's three fictional works.

For that reason, it is very surprising to me that so little has been written about *Rose Clark*. Two critics, Joyce W. Warren and Nina Baym, have written short studies of the novel, and each of them has focused primarily on Gertrude Dean. Baym has gone as far as to say that Gertrude and Rose are co-heroines of the novel (253). I don't feel that this argument can be supported, since Gertrude doesn't appear until after the halfway point of the novel, and, except for the chapter in which she tells Rose the story of her life, she never takes center stage. The reader is never at a doubt who is the heroine of this novel; it is always Rose Clark.

Still, I can understand why both Warren and Baym would prefer to write about Gertrude. She is an interesting, strong character, while Rose is somewhat less so.

The best word to describe Rose is probably childlike. In the first section of the novel, of course, she is a child. Even then, she is portrayed as being an exceedingly innocent and naïve child. Miss Timmins, the half-sympathetic factotum of the orphanage, is often perplexed by the innocent questions that Rose asks her. "Do you say those things a purpose, or do they come by accident, like?" Timmins asks Rose (24). Rose's simplicity and purity almost are enough to make Timmins refuse to do the cruel things that Mrs. Markham requires of her. At the very least, they do make Timmins feel very guilty for doing them.

Even when Rose becomes an adult, she still has many childlike qualities, in both her appearance and her personality. She is described as being "a little woman four feet high" (200), so she is still looking at the world on a child's level.

Rose also reacts to things much as a child would. When Mrs. Bond's servant Bridget insults her, saying "Thank the Virgin, *I* am an honest woman," Rose reacts by running away from home, first to the woods outside the house, and later to New Orleans (174). She is unable to think rationally enough to realize that she will almost certainly be worse off anywhere else, and she has no real plan. She has no good reason to believe that she will find Vincent in New Orleans; her decision to search for him there seems to be nothing more than a whim. "Had you asked, she could have given no reason for the magnetism which drew her thither" (203), the reader is told.

Rose also has a temper, even though she succeeds most of the time in controlling it. Still, when she receives a letter from her Aunt Dolly condemning her as an immoral person, she reacts intensely.

> Rose sprung up and paced the chamber floor. The veins in her temples swelled almost to bursting. Her large dark eyes flashed, and her teeth closed over her full red lip till the blood almost started, and tearing the letter into pieces, she trampled it under foot. The babe crept smiling after picking up the bits as they fell from her hand. With a quick grasp she wrenched them from his tiny hand, trampling them again under foot. Then as the boy uttered a low, grieved cry, she snatched him to her breast, covered him with kisses, and throwing him upon the bed, burst into a long and passionate fit of weeping. (118)

This is the only passage in all of Fanny Fern's fiction where a good female character reacts to something with passion and anger. They usually react as a "true woman" would, by first being utterly shocked, often either fainting or falling ill, and gradually becoming resigned to whatever fate it is that befalls them. This passage alone bears testimony to the fact that women can react to something with anger and outrage, as Fanny Fern herself often did in her own life.

One other passage demonstrates the fire and passion that Rose carries inside of her. When Vincent is finally restored to her, no one is sure how she will react. He

has deserted her, after all, and it has been seven long years since she has seen him. Vincent himself is afraid to see her:

> A deadly pallor overspread the stranger's face as he glanced in the direction of the door. John, who was standing with his back to it, turned around—and there—in the doorway, stood Rose with her small head bent forward—her lips apart—and her dilated eyes fixed upon the prostrate form before her. It was only for an instant—with a piercing cry, in which fear and joy both found utterance, she bounded to his side—kissed his brow, his lips, his eyes. Oh, was death to divide them then? God forbid!
>
> "Vincent—Vincent—my own Vincent!" and in that long, idolatrous kiss, her woman's heart absolved the past, whatever that past might be. (404)

All the time that Rose has been waiting for Vincent, it has seemed to the reader and everyone around her that she is waiting for him out of submission and purity. The implication is that she cannot think of remarrying only because she would consider it morally wrong to do so. This scene forcefully reveals to the reader that at least part of what has kept Rose bonded to Vincent for so long is sexual desire. This is something that has never been alluded to in any other of Fern's works.

But even though Rose has a passionate side that few of Fern's characters have, she is still passive, if only because she is ineffectual. Although she claims to be searching for Vincent all the time he is missing, she doesn't do anything that is actually useful to find him. In New Orleans, where she has no reason to suspect he might be, her only strategy is to wander the streets looking for him. When she reads the obituary of Vincent L'Estrange Vincent in the newspaper, it does not even occur to her to ask anyone if he met the description of her Vincent; she just assumes that they must be the same person. When she meets Mrs. Vincent, she doesn't ask to see his portrait or even a sample of his handwriting. And when she dreams that Vincent is still alive, even though she claims that she fervently believes it is true (349), she makes no renewed effort to find him.

The effect of all this is to make the reader quite aggravated with Rose at times. It is hard to believe that any woman, no matter how passive, and no matter how young and inexperienced, could make so little effort to find the man that she quite clearly loves more than anyone else on this earth. I believe that this is exactly the feeling that Fanny Fern wants the reader to experience. While it is a touching moment when Rose and Vincent are finally reunited, one cannot help thinking that it could have happened much earlier if only Rose had been able to act. The effect of this is to make the reader reject the "true woman" stereotype and long for a character who is more active and more realistic.

Fern's contemporary readers likely felt the same way. No sales figures are available for *Rose Clark,* which means that it is likely that the novel was not a best seller as *Ruth Hall* was. The reviewers were kinder to *Rose Clark,* but they were not overly enthusiastic. The reviewer of *Harper's Magazine* is typical. "Rose Clark develops a sweet feminine nature, and wins both sympathy and admiration by her noble bearing in the most perplexing circumstances," he wrote. "The story, though still too fragmentary for any but the followers of Sterne, has a more continuous movement, and is more smoothly rounded in its details" (260). The editor of *The Ladies' Repository* was similar in his comments. He wrote, "*Rose Clark,* her latest work, possesses many of her highest excellences, and some of her most glaring defects" (121).

Even so, not every critic was pleased with the novel. The reviewer for *Little's Living Age* was quite severe. He wrote that *Rose Clark* "has at least the merit of being clever and amusing. It has, however, the serious drawback of being very coarse, extremely vulgar, and painfully cynical" (259). These are exactly the kind of comments that had been made two years earlier about *Ruth Hall.* It must have pained Fanny Fern to think that even when she bent over backwards to please the critics, they still misunderstood her work.

Rose Clark was Fanny Fern's last work of fiction. Certainly the bad reviews played some part in this, but there were other factors as well. When *Rose Clark* was released in December 1855, she had just signed an exclusive deal to become

columnist for the *New York Ledger*. She was to write a column for them every week, without fail, for 16 years, until the week of her death (Warren 211). The same month that she began writing for the *Ledger*, January 1856, she also married for the third time (Warren 150). This was to be her happiest and longest marriage; it also lasted until her death.

Fanny Fern had entered into a new chapter of her life, one that was too busy and full for her to worry about writing fiction. One can be saddened that she never gave the world more of her tales, but knowing that the reason was that her real life was too full to allow fiction to intrude softens the blow.

CONCLUSION

As this study has shown, Fanny Fern used a variation of the "true woman" ideal as a character in each of her works of fiction. The heroines of each of her works embody to differing degrees the traits of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness.

This study has also attempted to show that Fanny Fern used this ideal deliberately and subversively. It is difficult for a reader to encounter Mary Ford and not want to tell her to "snap out of it" and go on with her life. It is also difficult to read about Rose Clark's ineffectual search for her husband and not hope that she will take a more active approach. It has been my contention that these are exactly the responses that Fanny Fern was hoping to elicit from her readers, in an effort to point out how unlikely the "true woman" ideal actually appeared when put into practice.

Fanny Fern couldn't write novels that were as forthright as her newspaper columns and please the critics at the same time. She experimented with using the device of female passivity as a way to get around the restrictions she felt were being placed on her. In this venture, she met with only moderate success with the critics, and at the same time she lost a part of the popular audience that she was aiming to reach. In the end, she decided to concentrate on doing what she did best and write a really good, really honest newspaper column every week.

Even so, it is impossible to say that Fanny Fern's brief attempt at being a novelist was a complete failure. *Ruth Hall* is being read once again in literature classrooms all around the country, and the very parts of it that the critics couldn't stand are the parts that are most adored today. *Rose Clark* and "Fanny Ford" have not met with the same success, but hopefully, by shedding a little light on these works, this study will help to renew interest in them as well.

There is much in "Fanny Ford" and *Rose Clark* that is worthy of study. I am well aware that I have only begun to scratch the surface in my examination of these works. It is my dream that one day, other scholars will open these works and begin to see all the possibilities that lie there, waiting to be discovered.

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